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Revitalizing urban revitalization in Poland: Towards a new agenda for research and practice


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Abstract

As a starting point, this paper recognizes the key role of the notion of 'revitalization' in the development of the multi-sectoral approach to urban renewal in Poland over the last 15 years. Thus, while acknowledging the important limitations of revitalization programs to date, it aims not so much to reject or criticize the current model revitalization, but rather to 'revitalize' the notion of revitalization itself. Based both on interviews with engaged practitioners of revitalization in Poland and on a review of practices existing elsewhere, this paper seeks to infuse the Polish imaginary of revitalization with transformative policy agendas.

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Rewitalizacja: Between a structural approach and a fountain

Every planning system produces its own ideology. While ostensibly aimed at transforming spaces, urban planning is also a discursive practice organized around a set of ideological keywords (Gunder & Hiller 2009). Many of those keywords are currently global in scope – words like ‘sustainability’, ‘smart city’ or ‘sustainable development’ organize planning debates around the world. Some of them, however, even if they sound familiar in several places, perform ideological functions that are regionally more specific. Such is the case of the notion of ‘revitalization’, which has become a crucial keyword of Polish urban policy practice over the last 15 years.

Supposedly equivalent to the English term ‘revitalization’, the Polish term *rewitalizacja* is an umbrella notion which encompasses meanings conveyed in English with a range of expressions, including but not limited to ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘urban renewal’. Such fuzzy boundaries of meaning are, paradoxically, an asset of the keyword rather than a problem. For keywords are not scientific abstractions, but rather rhetorical hooks that organize the discourse. They provide a common point in otherwise contested debates (Williams 1985; see also Kusiak 2017: 13ff). For example, while there are many different visions on what ‘sustainability’ might mean, in principle no one dares to be against ‘sustainability’ as such. However, for this reason keywords might be effectively harnessed to conceal controversial agendas or to serve dubious political functions. The notion of ‘revitalization’, for example, was in many instances recognized to have masked processes of deliberate gentrification (Jadach-Sepiolo 2009; Jaskólski & Smolarski 2016; Szaja 2016).

And yet ideological keywords may also have great pragmatic value for urban communities. Like a secret phrase, they may open access to national and international streams of funding. In the era of low municipal budgets and high external funding, words like ‘revitalization’ often become Trojan horses, in which structural responses to urban problems may be smuggled into the universe of ‘projectocracy’. It is no accident, then, that use of the word *rewitalizacja* in Poland rose sharply after 2004, coinciding with Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU). This does not mean, however, that Poland’s interest in revitalization policies was mainly cynical and related to structural funds: the word ‘revitalization’ was harnessed as a strategic tool to respond to a real need. By the time of EU accession, Polish urban experts and grassroots urban activist had come to acknowledge that the *laissez faire* approach to urban development which characterized the first 15 years of Poland’s transition to capitalism had led to feelings of spatial alienation and

an overall urban crisis (Buczek 2006; Billert & Jędraszko 2006; Kusiak 2017).

The notion of ‘revitalization’ has thus become one of the main heuristic devices making it possible to bring urban issues back onto the state’s political agenda, and also conceptually to link local urban predicaments with the cycles of urban decay and regeneration happening elsewhere (most importantly in the UK and Germany). The ensuing wealth of publications on revitalization (e.g., Jarczewski 2009; Rydzik 2009; Zborowski 2009; Jarczewski & Ziobrowski 2010; Ziobrowski 2010, 2011; Kozak 2014; Kaczmarek 2015; Parysek 2016; Kołsut 2017; Trzepacz & Warchalska-Troll 2017) reflects the success in mainstreaming revitalization as a policy agenda. This success has become more palpable thanks to favorable changes in policy and legislation (for an overview see Kowalczyk 2017). Most prominently, in 2014 the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development drafted the National Revitalization Agenda 2022 (*Ministerstwo Infrastruktury i Rozwoju* [MIiR] 2014), and in 2015 the Parliament passed a special *Revitalization Act* (2015).

Inevitably though, the policy mainstreaming of ‘revitalization’ has also blunted its edge. Analyzing revitalization programs in six Polish regions, M. W. Kozak (2014: 76) argues that ‘actual revitalization has been replaced by a set of ancillary activities that are somehow related to revitalization aims, but nonetheless far from comprehensive’. Borrowing from R. K. Merton (1968: 308), he explains this phenomenon as a ‘succession of goals’, that is the replacing of complex and challenging goals with ones that appear similar but are far easier to achieve. The result is not just a disparity between the ambitious agendas of revitalization and its actual practice: the transformative capacity of the notion of revitalization has atrophied. The head of a revitalization program in a major Polish city complained to me recently that revitalization, despite the increased funding and better legal tools, has been conceptually reduced to ‘the classical triumvirate of façade renovations, club meetings for the elderly, and – necessarily – a market square with a fountain’.

While there are many legitimate reasons for criticizing ideological keywords, there are also many reasons to fight for their meaning. Indeed, reshaping the meaning of the notions that inform state policies became an important part of the participatory urban agenda in Poland. Local urban experts and grassroots activists have been organizing workshops, writing policy manuals, and training public servants in order to expand the scope of revitalization policies and to increase the quality of interventions (see among others GTZ 2003; Kołacz & Wielgus 2015; Szlachetko & Borówka 2017; Jadach-Sepiolo, Kułaczowska & Mróz 2018). This paper,

commissioned by the organizers of Poland's 5th Congress of Revitalization, joins these efforts to fight for and reshape the meaning of revitalization in Poland. Thus, instead of evaluating existing policies and practices, it puts forward the hypothesis that expanding the content of an ideological keyword can be a meaningful step towards expanding the scope of actual policies associated with it. In this way, the paper aims to 'revitalize' the notion of revitalization in Polish policy discourse by infusing it with new transformative content. Acknowledging the political momentum and operative value of the 'revitalization agenda', this paper seeks to expand the range of tools and ideas that are included in the notion of revitalization, and thus, ultimately, further the scope of what revitalization can and should actually do for Polish cities.

In terms of method, this work is based on a series of qualitative interviews with practitioners of revitalization in Poland, including both public officials and community activists. The selection of respondents was motivated by a twofold criterion: their 'idealist' engagement in transforming the city, and their 'realpolitik' experience in shaping and implementing revitalization policies within Polish municipal offices. If such a twofold perspective was sought, it was to reduce, on the one hand, an institutional bias (the tendency of people who work 'for the system' to justify the policies implemented and the overarching ideologies espoused) and, on the other hand, a critical bias (the tendency of activists to be critical of the status quo while overlooking the structural and institutional frameworks within which urban change takes place). In their respective communities, respondents were often referred to as 'charismatic leaders' of revitalization who 'are really trying to change the system from the inside'. Some of those public officials interviewed in this sample did not plan to become public servants and joined the public service in an attempt to bring about change in their community. Some of them have previous experience as academics or community activists.

In semi-structured interviews, the respondents were asked to focus on what did not work or what was lacking in present revitalization programs, identifying the key areas that were not sufficiently addressed by revitalization policies and the problems that were overlooked. They also talked about their 'revitalization dreams': alternative approaches that they would welcome in revitalization programs. The ideas named by the respondents were subsequently expanded with literature research and summarized into a potential research and policy agenda. This methodology, akin to academic consulting, was chosen due to its important 'bridging' function: it links academic research with the problems faced by practitioners on the ground (Shugan 2004: 176). The following

main section of this paper summarizes and develops the five main points that were repeatedly mentioned by my responders, sometimes supplementing them with some practical examples of tools employed elsewhere.

Revitalization with more fiscal courage: municipal banks

One of the main frustrations of my interviewees – including those currently active as municipal officials – was the lack of what might be called municipal fiscal courage. Importantly, this is not a simple complaint about the (generally always limited) budget. The problem is described not so much as a lack of money, but rather as a lack of systemic leverage that would allow municipalities to participate more actively in local economic development, and thus gain some independence from both state and commercial funding.

One of the simplest and yet most far-reaching ideas for addressing this problem – an idea also broached in the past by the Association of Polish Cities (*Związek Miast Polskich*, in Polish) – is municipal banking. In Poland some of the most basic functions usually associated with municipal banking (such as some limited support for social housing projects, or the preferential financing of urban structural investments) are already performed by *Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego* (BGK). And yet, it would be hard to classify BGK as a bona fide municipal bank.

Municipal banks operate like private banking institutions, yet with some important differences. First, although they function according to commercial principles, municipal banks do not strive to maximize profit (shareholder value), but instead to maximize public welfare (stakeholder value). They also desist from engaging in speculative financial transactions. Second, municipal banks (general) have no owner other than the public, and thus cannot be bought or sold. Third, their objective is to serve all community members, including people living off social welfare. Fourth, their management and supervisory boards include political representation of the municipality council, as well as some members of the local community. Finally, while municipal banks strive to strengthen the region, their financial stability is secured by the meta-regional network. Thus, once they are set, municipal banks offer a stable and safe model of municipal fiscal engagement (Simpson 2013; Beitel 2016)

Thanks to their institutional design, municipal banks are able to facilitate local economic activities. The general rule is that local deposits fund loans for locally based enterprises, which includes both housing and business projects. This function of integrating the local economy potentially aligns with a holistic understanding of revitalization both as a social and an economic undertaking.

One of the most prominent example of municipal banking in Europe is the German Sparkasse system, a network of 390 municipal banks that have a public legal form of municipal trusteeship.

Revitalization against land-value speculation

The ease with which revitalization schemes slip into gentrification is related to the ‘rent gap’ mechanism (Smith 1996); that is, any intervention that enhances the use value of a degraded urban space also drives up its exchange value. The difference between the pre- and post-revitalization land values encourages speculation and thus very likely leads to the displacement of the original inhabitants.

Current Polish legislation about the revitalization process provides very few mechanisms to curb land speculation. Most crucially, there is no comprehensive system of cadastral taxation (*ad valorem* tax), which is one of the most efficient tools both for countering land value speculation and for mobilizing underused land. Instead, according to my respondents, it is common for property owners in a revitalization zone to strategically keep their land unleased until the end of revitalization program, in the expectation that rents will increase.

At the same time, the very few existing legal tools that could prevent gentrification in revitalization zones tend to be underused. The Revitalization Act (2015) (*ustawa o rewitalizacji*, in Polish), and especially the legal frameworks of the ‘special revitalization zone’ (*specjalna strefa rewitalizacyjna*, in Polish) and of ‘revitalization contract’ (*umowa rewitalizacyjna*, in Polish) make it possible, for example, to expropriate private land in the revitalized area in order to develop affordable municipal housing. To mine and my respondents’ knowledge, this possibility has yet to be used in any Polish municipality.

One of the most problematic aspects of land value speculation is that it significantly drives up the costs of infrastructural provision. The Revitalization Act (2015) was supposed to alleviate it, introducing some new tools for Land Value Capture (LVC), that is for recovering some of the value that public investments in infrastructure generates for private land owners (see e.g., Medda & Modelewska 2011). However, as analyzed by T. Zaborowski (2018), the legal framework introduced by the Revitalization Act (2015) is, when compared to similar legal and policy tools in Germany, largely inefficient. Specifically, the infrastructure-based betterment levy is misconstrued for at least three reasons: the mechanisms for calculating the levy are vague; the levy itself is capped at a mere 50% (as opposed to 90% in Germany); and it is also limited to technical infrastructure, disregarding any type of social infrastructure (Zaborowski 2018).

In sum, most of my respondents recommend both that the existing legal framework around revitalization be equipped with new tools that would efficiently limit land value speculation, and that the existing tools be used more daringly. Moreover, apart from ‘curbing’ speculation with the law, there is also a wide catalogue of ‘softer’ systemic tools and alternative housing models that could be included in the Polish imaginary of revitalization. Among most prominent of them are Community Land Trusts (CLT): that is, non-profit, community-led housing corporations that transgress the classic ownership/rent distinction (Davis 2010; Moore & McKee 2012; Ward 2014; Kelly 2015). The CLT model is already quite established in the US and the UK, and has recently gained in popularity in continental Europe. From a legal viewpoint, CLTs are enabled due to a separation of land ownership from ownership of buildings on the land.¹ A CLT owns bigger area of land subdivided into multiple parcels. The houses on it are subsequently sold to individual owners, who become members of that CLT. The profit from the lease of commercial structures is used for the benefit of the whole community. In the most successful cases, like in the municipality of Huaidi in China, these profits might even suffice to provide universal basic income for the CLT inhabitants. At the same time, CLTs are relatively open to the outside. To avoid a ‘bubble-like’ character, their governing bodies comprise at least three groups of stakeholders, which include CLT residents, members of the broader community not resident at the CLT, and municipal officials.

As one of my respondents noted, the legal framework of revitalization (especially the possibility of expropriating private land for affordable housing) could facilitate the development of CLTs in Poland, and thus provide a model for the long-term stabilization of land value in urban areas.

Revitalization of the new spatial forms

Revitalization policies to date have focused largely on renovating established spatial forms, such as historical market squares, tenement blocks, and nineteenth-century post-industrial complexes, as well as prefabricated modernist housing estates (*osiedla z wielkiej płyty*, in Polish) and unused railway areas. This approach has been justified on grounds of historical preservation, as well as by calls to rebuild a city’s historical identity. However, it’s time that revitalization came to include urban crisis in areas that are new, and yet from the outset troubled

¹ Interestingly, in Poland such a separation between land and building ownership was the legal basis of the so-called Warsaw Decree that enabled the postwar rebuilding of Warsaw. See: Property and the Use of Land in the Area of the Capital City of Warsaw (1945).

with poor quality urban space. Two types of urban development in particular demand careful intervention. First is the so-called farm-strip urbanization (*urbanizacja łanowa*, in Polish; por. Staniszkis 2017; Kusiak 2017: 125). Widespread after 1989, particularly in suburban areas, this form of ‘urbanization’ can best be described as the emergence of urban-style housing development on rural-style agricultural plots, with no attempt made to merge the lots and re-divide them into a typically urban network of streets. Its bizarreness mirrors Polish patterns of agricultural land division, which features small fields in the form of long, thin strips, slightly inclined towards the main road to facilitate ploughing (a typical size is 300x30 meters). The development of multi-family urban housing on such plots results in difficult road access and a general lack of public space.

The second type of new urban development needing revitalization are new large-scale peri-urban districts that have grown in an uncoordinated way. They usually consist of several (often gated) estates developed by private investors. Typical examples of this are the districts of Białołęka in Warszawa and Bielany in Wrocław. These districts lack public space and suffer from low infrastructural provision. While the respective municipalities have been trying supplement infrastructure networks, the explicit inclusion of such areas in revitalization agendas would open the way for more holistic, structural approaches.

However, to ‘revitalize’ such privately developed districts we need tools able, at least partially, to limit private ownership for the sake of the public good. Unlike historical urban cores, these new districts are developed almost exclusively on privately owned land. Thus, unless new schemes for recomunalization or compulsory purchase are developed, any holistic intervention might be blocked by the private owners.

Revitalization without scalar mismatch

Comprehensive revitalization is often hindered by a lack of institutional coordination between different levels of government Poland. A functional disparity between the pressures placed on urban regions by capitalist globalization and the weak position of Polish cities within the state’s governance structure, can be described in terms of ‘scalar mismatch’ (Kusiak 2017: 67). In relation to revitalization programs, this mismatch has yet another dimension: it manifests itself in the disharmony between the positions of the state, the voivodship and the municipalities regarding the allocation of the relevant EU funds.

The general guidelines for allocating EU funds for revitalization are published by the Ministry of Development (*Ministerstwo Rozwoju* [MR] 2016). However, as these

funds are subsequently transferred to the voivodship level, each marshal of the voivodship (*marszałek województwa*, in Polish) is entitled to narrow down the Ministerial guidelines and propose more concrete specifications. This rule is intended to promote more locally oriented revitalization. However, oftentimes a political conflict between the voivodship and municipality levels (which might be ruled by antagonistic political parties), or a simple lack of communication between them, creates actual barriers for the implementation of a municipality’s revitalization objectives. Moreover, voivodships are too internally diverse to provide detailed and yet tailored sets of guidelines to the range of municipalities subsumed under them and which include both large cities and rural villages. As a result, supposedly more locally minded recommendations can end up being completely unsuited to the municipalities’ actual problems. One of my respondents evoked as an example a municipality that has impressively low unemployment rates and in fact actively seeks to attract migrant workers. However, the voivodship’s binding guidelines for this municipality allocate a significant chunk of the budget to initiatives aimed at limiting unemployment, with little left for the integration of new migrant communities, which is a key issue in this municipality. So, rethinking revitalization demands more careful coordination between different levels of government.

Self-reflexive revitalization

All of my respondents agree that a higher level of flexibility and ongoing self-reflection must be built into revitalization programs. This could have three possible dimensions. First, apart from doing some comprehensive background research to facilitate the design of revitalization programs, the respondents called for ongoing, small-scale ad-hoc research interventions to enable revitalization programs to revise their assumptions on the go. Many of the structural reasons for urban problems become visible only after a revitalization program has started. Again, one typical example is the relation between revitalization programs and policies aimed at reducing unemployment. Revitalization toolkits involve a range of measures targeting unemployed residents, including, most prominently, vocational training and educational initiatives. However, revitalization practitioners have observed that pauperized urban residents are structurally discouraged from seeking employment by housing debt. Indeed, once a person for some reason loses her job and can thus no longer afford to pay rent in communal housing, debt and interest rates escalate very quickly, leading to a point in which all earnings (crucial, for example, to provide for children) are immediately garnished. Such

tenants often actually work, but prefer to work informally to make ends meet. This problem could be solved by effective policies of gradual debt relief.

Second, many sustainable revitalization agendas are difficult to carry out due to a lack of public education. My interviewees complained especially about the low general awareness concerning issues such as air pollution, transport and communal property. While research indicates the need to limit car transport, the issue is extremely contested. Civic education campaigns should thus be considered as part and parcel of revitalization programs.

Last but not least, self-reflexive revitalization ought to involve an internal reorganization of the municipality office to foster greater intra-departmental transparency. Moreover, all of my respondents were particularly enthusiastic about the practice of employing so-called revitalization lighthouse keepers, that is social workers tasked exclusively with discussing revitalization programs with communities on the ground, well prior to the actual intervention's starting. This has not only increased community participation in shaping those revitalization agendas, but also limited negative reactions to revitalization interventions.

Conclusion: taking revitalization literally

In the course of the development of new legislation, 'revitalization' was formally defined by the Polish Ministry of Investment and Development as:

'...a complex process of leading degraded areas out of crisis by way of holistic action (interrelated efforts undertaken in the social, economic, spatial-functional, technical and environmental domains), integrating initiatives in favour of local community, space and local economy, concentrated territorially and undertaken in a planned, coherent way through revitalization programs...'².

As my interviewees pointed out, this definition does not need to be changed, but rather to be taken literally. Indeed, revitalization programs have produced some

positive results in Polish cities. However, despite the growing catalogue of 'good practices' in Polish revitalization efforts (Jadach-Sepiolo, Kułaczowska & Mróz 2018), most revitalization programs still lack a holistic, systemic dimension. The economic and social aspects of existing revitalization programs seem at best separate, if not contradictory. Poor coordination between different scales of government means that revitalization agendas get stuck within a single-scale approach and are impoverished in terms of their fiscal and political imagination, which is further perpetuated by the lack of educational outreach.

My respondents viewed the key position of 'revitalization' as an ideological cornerstone of municipal policymaking, combined with privileged access to funding and some of the exceptional legal possibilities enabled in 'revitalization zones,' as an opportunity to empower cities in their role as economic and fiscal subjects, rather than mere agents of national and international economic agendas. Thus, in particular, my respondents call on municipalities to return the economy to urban society, as it is, for example, set out in the idea of municipal banking. The new forms of urban property, such as Community Land Trust, bring similar ideas into the domain of urban housing. Such interventions in urban fiscal policy and property relations are in many ways crucial for moving toward the next step, that is toward 'revitalizing' urban spaces that are relatively new, and yet already lacking in terms of their urban functionality. This is because the land in these new spaces is almost entirely privatized, making public intervention very costly and difficult.

All in all, the new proposed agenda for revitalization programs – as summarized in the five propositions presented in this paper—calls for an integration of social, economic, and institutional agendas in order to transform urban space. This can be seen by way of contrast with aesthetical interventions which – like the proverbial 'market square with a fountain' – seem to be spatial, but in reality are often used to camouflage the expressions in urban space of deeper structural problems.

2 Ministry of Infrastructure and Development site

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